When The Black Walnuts Fall…

By: N.R. Pollard

My high school has always had problems with its ceiling. Being a low-rise concrete slab in the middle of what was once rustic farmland meant humidity was both a constant facet and hindrance. Paired proficiently with the negligent, slipshod building codes of the early-1970s—that made it feasible for water to inevitably meander through the hidden gaps and derail the starry-eyed ambitions of the myopic faculty. In a last-minute gamble to bring in more natural light, the architects opted to place these broad skylights at all strategic junction points throughout the hallways. Initially, the idea worked out. But come the first variegated oak leaves of autumn, the once-transparent aperture now resembled an elementary art project adorned with seared orange and yellow tinges and stray pollen.

Any alumnus of North Warren Regional can attest to the tried-and-true ritual of once pin-dropping silence in the classroom being shattered by an unexpected *THUMP* *THU-THUMP* emanating from the ceiling above; knocking the sleepy potheads from their lulling doze and drawing all eyes upward. It wouldn't be until my junior year that I finally discovered the source of this perplexing noise by slipping and falling on my ass walking out to my dilapidated Nissan Altima. After a short burst of ribald expletives and regaining my bearings, I turned to see a black walnut the size of a Wilson tennis ball rocking comically back and forth between my dirt-laden high-tops. You see, after burgeoning the entire summer black walnuts typically ripen in the early weeks of fall, prompting them to plummet arbitrarily from the sanctum of their treetops to the frigid ground below. This sudden change in environment can make the wayward walnuts susceptible to peckish woodland scavengers and eager gastronomes

alike. Or in this case, slamming into the battered school roof during a geometry quiz and rolling off onto the pavement.

Depending on how rotten your walnut is, it can vary the amount of force necessary to split the protective green hull and let slip its putrid adobe-like innards; it also depends on who you're throwing it at. Many a playground scuffle was either started or ended by a rogue black walnut cutting through the air like a hand grenade and belting some poor unsuspecting kid in the back. The ultimate payoff was hawking it just hard enough to make it explode upon impact, succeeding in not only stunning your target but also splattering their clothes with a humiliating black stain that's damn-near impossible to get out no matter how hard you scrubbed. You were almost guaranteed to find at least one lost soul frantically trying to rub out the egregious mark in the bathroom sink once recess had ended, his attempt ultimately proving fruitless as it now stood out even more thanks to being drenched in stagnant tap water. Head hung in shame and muttering indignantly to himself as he shuffled toward the heavy wooden door with a dingy laminated poster reading out "STOP BULLYING: SPEAK UP!" taped to it and crept back into the packed hallway to face the music. All he needed was someone to play Taps for him.

It's all fun and games, however, until you accidentally hawk a ripe one, and now have to issue a letter of apology for giving Toby a grade-III concussion on the mulch. It's paramount for every kid to remember that when the black walnuts fall, you better clear out from under the tree. You just might end up like my old buddy Mark, who after taking a moment to recuperate under the shade fell victim to a plunging walnut, bonking him square on the top of the head and sending him down in turn. He would ultimately survive this arboreal ambush, but the proceeding volley of humiliating mockery made the incident notorious for many years to come and resulted in Mark ceasing all contact with us thereafter.

Oh well… in the wise odic words of Lesley Gore, “Que Sera, Sera”

Or was that Ann-Margret?

I dunno; it could be the goddamn Smothers Brothers for all I care. It’s the sentiment that still rings true.

Getting back to my high school, those flimsy skylights were not meant to handle all that added stress brought on by Mother Nature's discarded table scraps, weakening the mangy craftsmanship and adjacent rafters as the years turned to decades of continued neglect. A particularly heavy string of downpours around Thanksgiving time would finally mark their demise as cloudy water started oozing from the poorly caulked rims, drenching the surrounding ceiling tiles with eerie smudge patterns that reeked like a Belgian slit trench and resembled a drunken Rorschach test. The upperclassmen used to joke that the mildewed tiles were made of asbestos, and the smell alone shaved two years off your life every time you walked into the building. Many struggled with mysterious splitting headaches that baffled the stupefied nurses, who were always overwhelmed tending to fresh P.E. battle scars and trying to resuscitate the eighth freshman boy who greened-out during study hall.

Faced with such a dismaying blight and with structural integrity on the line, the Board of Ed in their infinite wisdom, opted not to patch the leak with a conventional trowel and spackle. Rather they chose to install these chintzy light fixtures fitted with imitation wood paneling right over top. Like slapping a Band-Aid on a compound fracture, the fix was merely temporary. As slowly but surely the leak came back, only this time there wouldn’t be any more rapport. The ceiling gave way in spectacular fashion, tearing a five-foot hole in the roof and sousing the freshly waxed floors with broken glass and accumulated runoff melded with fetid hunks of yellow

insulation. Come the next morning, a large pool tarp was draped around the sordid scene, as the maintenance crew hastily toiled away to mend the severe laceration. The bottleneck in the hallway lasted an entire month, slowing all foot traffic to a grating trudge as the soft pitter-patter of water pinged against the armada of orange Home Depot buckets strung across the slippery floor tiles.